A Horseman in the Sky

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF AMBROSE BIERCE

Ambrose Bierce was born to a large family in Ohio. His parents were poor, but still appreciative of literature and passed on their love of reading and writing to their son. Bierce grew up in Kosciusko County, Indiana, and initially became a printer's apprentice following his schooling. In 1861, at the age of 19, he volunteered for the 9th Indiana Infantry to fight in the Union army. He was in numerous battles, most notably the Battle of Shiloh, which marked him for the rest of his life. After his military service, Bierce settled for some time in San Francisco where he worked as a journalist and editorial writer. His contributions to several local papers gained him some fame, and it was at this time that his career as a writer truly began. He lived for three years in England, during which time he contributed to more magazines and published his first book, *The Fiend's Delight* (1873). Bierce's most notable works were his morbid fiction anthologies, *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians* (1891) and *Can Such Things Be?* (1893), in which he created detailed pictures of his own Civil War experiences told through constrained viewpoints, as well as *The Devil's Dictionary* (1906), a satirical and vicious lexicon of his own perspectives on society. Bierce married Mollie Day in 1871 and had three children with her. Both of his sons died before he did, and he divorced his wife in 1904. In 1914, Bierce told correspondents that he was travelling to Mexico to follow Pancho Villa's actions in the Mexican Revolution. This was the last time anyone heard from Bierce. How, when, and where he died was never discovered.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The American Civil War, which Bierce fought in, began in April 1861, shortly after the election of Abraham Lincoln. While many issues separated the Union and Confederate states, the practice of slavery was chief among them, giving the decision of who to fight for a starkly moralistic weight. As in the story, this often split families down the middle. Although Bierce's stories are fictional, he filled them with details he himself had seen and grounded them in the grim reality of a nation at war with itself. "A Horseman in the Sky" takes place in Western Virginia, where Bierce had his first experiences of warfare.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"A Horseman in the Sky" exemplifies the way in which Bierce straddled the Realist and American Gothic movements by combining elements of both in his work, such as his use of existential horror, patricide, and apocalyptic imagery framed against unflinchingly accurate accounts of what Bierce saw in the Civil War. He is considered by many to have entered into the tradition of H.P. Lovecraft and Edgar Allan Poe in his utilization of horror—though he is generally regarded as less skilled of a horror writer than both masters. His realistic depiction of war strongly influenced the future work of Ernest Hemingway and Stephen Crane, most notably Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), which is also a Civil War story about a young Union private that mixes elements of realism and impressionism.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** A Horseman in the Sky
- **When Written:** 1889
- **Where Written:** The United States, possibly San Francisco
- **When Published:** April 14, 1889 in *The Examiner*, a San Francisco newspaper
- **Literary Period:** Realism/American Gothic
- **Genre:** Short story
- **Setting:** Near a cliff's edge in western Virginia during the American Civil War
- **Climax:** Carter Druse shoots his father
- **Antagonist:** Druse's Father
- **Point of View:** Third person

EXTRA CREDIT

Map Maker. Midway through his military career, Bierce was commissioned as a topographical engineer, mapping the terrain of future battlefields. This expertise is evident in the story as he pays particular attention to the topography of the cliff and valley below where Carter Druse lies as a sentry.

PLOT SUMMARY

It is autumn of 1861, in the midst of the American Civil War. A young Union Soldier named Carter Druse has been posted as a sentry near the edge of a cliff that overlooks a forested valley. In the valley hides five Union army regiments as they rest and prepare to surprise attack a nearby Confederate encampment. Although they are hidden in the valley, they are also vulnerable; there is only one narrow entrance and one narrow exit. The topography is such that they would be severely disadvantaged and unable to escape should their enemies discover them.

The narrator briefly recalls the morning that Druse left his childhood home. Druse is the son of wealthy Virginian parents and the product of a comfortable and cultured childhood. As a

Virginian, it was expected that he would fight for the Confederate states. Despite this, his conscience compelled him to join a passing Union regiment. At the time Druse's father called his son a traitor, yet also encouraged him to "do what you conceive to be your duty." His father mentions that Druse's mother is on her deathbed, but should both father and son survive the war, they may reconcile then. Both Druse and his father show respect for one another in their final parting, and Druse leaves his parents to become a Union soldier, proving himself both brave and noble.

The story returns to the scene on the cliff. Despite the importance of Druse's keeping watch, and despite the fact that he is a noble and courageous man, he has fallen asleep. His rifle is already positioned to be fired, however, and Druse awakes to find that while he was sleeping, a lone **horseman**, a Confederate officer, has crept up to the cliff's edge and is gazing down into the valley at the exposed Union soldiers. His face is turned so that Druse can not yet see his identity. The horseman is standing still and looks so picturesque and dignified in the afternoon sun that Druse is initially unsure if he is entirely awake. It seems to him that perhaps he has somehow slept until the end of the war and is now staring at a monument that has been erected in memoriam. He spends several moments admiring the splendor of the scene and the form of the horseman, which looks to him like a Grecian statue carved from marble.

The horse moves just enough to remind Druse of where he is and what he must do. He aims his rifle at the horseman's breast. The horseman turns his head and seems to look straight at Druse, though he does not actually spy him in the bushes. Druse suddenly goes pale and nearly faints, overcome by the gravity of what he is about to do. He reflects on the ethics of killing an unaware man for the simple crime of possessing dangerous knowledge. He even briefly considers letting him wander on in the hopes that the horseman has not actually discovered the Union regiments, but quickly realizes this is a vain hope. Druse takes aim once more, this time at the horse. The words of his father echo in his head like a "divine mandate," demanding that he put duty before all else. He steadies himself and fires. Both horse and rider fall over the cliff's edge. The horse is killed by the bullet, the rider by the fall.

A wandering officer from the Union regiments has found himself standing beneath the cliff's overhang. Looking upward, he sees the horseman still astride his horse, falling to his death. However, rather than perceiving what has actually happened, he mistakenly believes that it is a flying horseman. The vision seems to him an image of the apocalypse. He so sincerely believes that the horseman was actually riding through the air that when he hears the crash of bodies hitting the lower trees, he searches as if they had followed a gliding trajectory rather than falling straight downward.

After Druse fires, he reloads and remains lying in the shrub, keeping watch. His face is white, but beyond that he is unmoved. A sergeant crawls up to his position and asks what he has shot at. Without moving or looking at him, Druse reveals that the horseman he shot down had been his own father.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Carter Druse – The protagonist of the story, Carter Druse is a private in the Union Army during the American Civil War. Carter Although he fights for the Union, Druse was raised in Virginia, a Confederate State. He was born to a life of privilege and refinement, which he willingly gave up to follow his conscience regarding the Civil War, and joined a Union Regiment. This creates a tension between him and his father, for although they both respect each other, they now find themselves fighting for opposing armies and ideals. Druse is frequently described as noble and courageous. After leaving the home of his childhood, he earns the commendation of his comrades and superiors through his bravery and strength of character. Druse spends the entirety of the story (aside from the flashback to the morning that he left his family home) lying in a thicket, posted as a sentry to guard several Union Regiments in a precarious position. His respect for his father and sense justice and morality come to a head when Druse's father, who is doing reconnaissance for the opposing Confederate army, discovers the Union regiments that Druse is supposed to be protecting. Druse is forced to make a decision between upholding his duty as a soldier (by killing his father) or letting his father live, thus failing in his duty and risking the lives of his fellow men. Druse chooses to kill his father, and in doing so he is becoming his own man. Killing **the horseman** signals the end of one generation of Druse's family also marks the end of an era of slavery.

Druse's Father – Carter Druse's father is a wealthy Virginian and a Confederate officer in the Civil War. At the end of the story, Druse's father is also revealed to be the eponymous **horseman** whom his son has shot down. Druse's father is described as a man who believes in duty and has instilled such a virtue into his son. On the day that Carter Druse leaves to join the Union Army, Druse's father tells him that although he is a traitor to his Virginia homeland, he should go and do what he feels is his duty to the best of his ability, and that should they both live to see the end of the war, they will speak again. Druse's father is heartbroken at the parting of ways with his son and clearly loved and respected him very much. Druse's father comes to exemplify the horrors of the Civil War in two ways. There is the obvious tragedy of a son and father pitted against each other in war. After the shot has been fired and Druse's father and his horse are falling through the air, he is mistaken for a supernatural warrior, a horseman of the apocalypse by the wandering officer. Druse's father thus also

becomes a vessel for the author's oft-used supernatural imagery and the implications of near-biblical violence and devastation of the war.

The Wandering Officer – A Union officer who has wandered away from camp and witnesses Druse's father and his mount falling from a cliff side. Due to the angle of the sight and the officer's precarious mental state, he believes that Druse's father is a flying **horseman** and an apocalyptic symbol. The wandering officer briefly surmises that perhaps he has been chosen as some sort of prophet of the apocalypse, reinforcing the supernatural imagery used by Bierce to underscores the horrors of the Civil War.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The Commander – A commander in the Union army, whom the wandering officer reports to.

The Sergeant – A sergeant in the Union army, to whom Carter Druse reveals that he has just killed his own father.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

DUTY, MORALITY, AND JUSTICE

In "A Horseman in the Sky," Ambrose Bierce conceals the full scope of the story's moral dilemma until the story's final pages: the conflict between duty and family unique to the American Civil War. The protagonist, a young soldier in the Union Army named Carter Druse, has been posted as a sentry to protect his comrades and keep their whereabouts hidden. **The horseman**, an enemy officer later revealed to be Druse's father, has discovered their location. Druse is forced to choose between letting his father escape with information that would guarantee the demise of his comrades, or killing his father in ambush. Druse ultimately decides that duty to his comrades and their cause must come before his family, a conviction that his father instilled in him. Bierce thus explores the complex nature of duty in many forms throughout his story, and ultimately seems to suggest a primacy of moral duty that overrides duty to all else—including family.

Druse's actions throughout the story are described within the context of duty. Druse is initially introduced as being "asleep at his post of duty"—an infraction for which he would be executed, "death being the just and legal penalty of his crime." The narrator even refers to him in this context as "the criminal." This immediately establishes the hierarchy of military authority and imbues such command with a sense of arbitrariness that would seem to undermine that authority; death hardly seems a proportionately "just" punishment for having fallen asleep on the job. Druse is also repeatedly described by Bierce as a deeply courageous and devoted soldier—purposely contradicting the initial label of "criminal"—making such potential punishment for simply being overcome by exhaustion seem all the more absurd; blind adherence to duty, in this case, would result in the foolish loss of a valuable Union soldier. The story would thus seemingly condemn duty for duty's sake.

Yet even as Bierce undermines rigid, unquestioning duty, he valorizes thoughtful consideration of one's duty to higher moral concepts. Before the horseman turns his head and Druse realizes that he is aiming his rifle at his own father, he does not relish the thought of killing an unaware man. Even after he recognizes his father and is agonizing over the decision, the reader is kept in the dark. Bierce initially frames the dilemma with the ethics of killing man from a hidden vantage for the mere crime of possessing dangerous information, as opposed to killing a man in open combat or in self-defense. Druse ultimately decides that he must the man for the sake of his fellow soldiers—that is, in the name of a greater good. In this way, Bierce complicates the justice of violence for a cause before the reader is even aware of the familial connection; Druse experiences cognitive dissonance between duty to his specific troop versus duty to a broader concept of moral violence.

Notably, before the main scene of the story, Druse had chosen to place duty before family, a fact that pained his father but was also respected by him. Druse grew up in Virginia, meaning he should have fought in the Confederacy had he chosen to stay true to his family and his home. Although Bierce does not state his motivations explicitly, he describes Druse as a "courageous gentleman" and praises him, making it likely that his decision to fight for the Union was motivated more by ethical conviction than mere rebellion. Bierce cuts away from the main story to describe the moment that Druse announced his ambitions to join the Union army to his father and left his home. His father says, "Well, go, sir, and whatever may occur do what you conceive to be your duty. Virginia, to which you are a traitor, must get on without you." That Druse's decision makes him a traitor in the eyes of his state and his family reveals the complicated and conflicting nature of duty. It's worth noting that the author himself was an abolitionist who volunteered to join the Union army during the Civil War; as such, it's possible that Bierce is suggesting that abandoning an unjust cause cannot be treason—or, if it is, it is just treason in the service of a higher moral duty.

Ironically, it is ultimately the words of his father that compel Druse to kill him. His father's admonishment to follow his duty wherever it may lead echo in his head in the moments before he

pulls the trigger. By ending his father's life, then, he also pays reverence to him by heeding his advice, painful though it may be. Both Druse and his father, for all their political differences, thus both appear to live above all by the duty of conscience.

SONS VS. FATHERS

Before the Civil War, Bierce implies that Carter Druse has led a wealthy and privileged young life under the shelter of his parents. In joining the Union army, he both physically and ideologically steps away from the domain of his father to assert his independence and discover who he truly is. Despite their diverging paths, however, Bierce describes both Druse and his father as loving and respecting each other. The tension is not born of bitterness or resentment, but the natural need for Druse to become his own man. Through this, Bierce typifies the classic generational conflict between children and their parents, and further suggests that embodied in the Civil War was the conflict between a progressive future and a traditional past.

The unspoken point of contention between Druse and his father is the ideological issue at the heart of the Civil War: slavery. Interestingly, neither slavery or the Confederacy are ever explicitly named in the story and the Union army is named only once. However, Bierce, himself an abolitionist, casts Druse as a noble defector from the Confederate ideals, a traitor to the slave state of Virginia and to his father's principles. Although slavery is never mentioned, Druse was "the son of wealthy parents, an only child, and had known such ease and cultivation and high living as wealth and taste were able to command…" It is likely that Druse's parents would have owned slaves, or at least been a member of slave-owning communities. In fighting for the abolition, Druse is consequently fighting for the destruction of a major piece of familial identity.

Druse is duty-bound to the Union and to abolition, fighting for a free and progressive future. Contrarily, his father is fighting for the protection of the old ways invariably tied to slavery. Son and father are thus fighting for competing ideals for the future of the country, visions of what has been and what could be. Throughout the war, sons and fathers, friends and neighbors were willing to kill each other to decide whether the country would emancipate the slaves or maintain their bondage. Bierce thus suggests the relationship between Druse and his father as a sort of microcosm of the war itself, positing their personal generational conflict as reflective of the conflict between the past and future of America.

Druse leaving his family is also notably an act of self-actualization. By leaving the shelter, comfort, and worldview of his childhood home, he is on a journey to discover who he truly is. Druse is said to be a private in the Union army, the lowest rank. Not only has he stepped out of the comfort of the privileged home, then, but he has stepped down to the level of a poor and expendable foot soldier. Most importantly, he has done it on his own terms. Rather than by privilege, Druse distinguishes himself to his comrades and superiors "by conscience and courage, by deeds of devotion and daring." In his new life as a Union soldier, he has earned his reputation rather than inherited it.

Even so, the marks of his high-brow upbringing still remain, most notably when he first spies **the horseman**: "His first feeling was a keen artistic delight," Bierce writes, describing in detail how the colors of the horseman's uniform harmonize with the backdrop of the sky and how the stern lines make him appear to be carved from marble like some Grecian statue. This hesitation lasts only a moment, however, and his sense of duty quickly overrides his cultured appreciation of the aesthetic forms, fostered by a gentle and well-educated childhood. Even so, Bierce nods here to the way that, for all his independence, the son is still shaped by the father, and will be throughout his life. Thus, Bierce highlights the painful necessity of children to step out from under their parents' wing, despite what love and loyalty may persist. Without leaving his childhood home, Druse would never discover what he believed about loyalty, duty, or conscience, or who he truly is.

In shooting down the horseman, Bierce resolves the conflict between the son and the father, between one generation and the next. Druse has killed the only surviving member of his family to fulfill his duty and to champion his own ideals over his father's. Though without malice, he has erased the life, presence, and worldview of his father from the earth to be replaced by his own. This is a reflection of the broader ideological change in America; the Union, with its goal of emancipation, put to death the Confederate ideology predicated on the use of slaves. One societal ideal had to die so that another could find its footing and mature.

THE HORRORS OF THE CIVIL WAR

Bierce's telling of the Civil War is justifiably cynical. Although he never explicitly names the unique horrors of the Civil War, they form the background and unspoken context of the story. As exemplified by the tragedy of Carter Druse being forced to kill his own father for the sake of noble duty, the nature of the war confounded people's compassion, ethics, sense of morality, and even ties to friends and family. Bierce eliminates any notion of lasting valor or heroism. For him, the Civil War was not adventurous or exciting, but morally and existentially crushing. In his use of supernatural imagery and portrayal of meaningless pain, he paints the war more as a strange fever dream than any sort of heroic quest.

Bierce's story lacks any form of traditional hero or villain. Druse is the protagonist and his father is the antagonist, but neither behave or are rewarded in the tradition of the hero's journey. Despite his heroism, it is noted that Druse would have been executed had he been found sleeping at his post. This one

negative action was enough to negate all other positive ones, underscoring the horrific calculus of war. In the timeline of the story, Druse also never becomes more than a private despite gaining the respect and admiration or comrades and superiors. He is neither rewarded nor heralded; rather, Druse *suffers* for his heroism. Had stayed he asleep, abandoned his post, or elected to let his regiment fall under attack, he would have been able to spare the life of his father and the pain of being the one to kill him.

Even the sergeant who first realizes what Druse has done does not offer congratulations or thanks but walks away expressing shock and horror. Bierce staunchly denies any sort of karmic justice within the world of the story. While there are no traditionally evil antagonists (even Druse's father is described as honorable despite being a Confederate officer) the good men still suffer. The evil of the story, then, is existential rather than particular. Any notions of good prevailing over evil, of justice or order or balance are noticeably absent from Bierce's telling. There is no glamor in Bierce's war, only morally perplexing decisions and painful realities.

Bierce uses apocalyptic imagery, as he has in other stories, to reinforce the chaos and the horror of the American Civil War, which, in many ways, may have felt as if the world itself was coming apart or ending. America itself was being rent in two. In the moments in which he is grappling with the decision to kill his own father, Druse envisions **the horseman** as a great black figure creating fiery circles in the sky. Where previously he had seen the horse and rider as a Grecian statue, now they are a figure of dread. Though not an explicit reference, the imagery recalls biblical scenes of judgment such as the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah or the plague of fire upon Egypt. The wandering officer who witnesses Druse's father falling to his death perceives it as an apocalyptic event, even briefly imagining himself to be some sort of prophetic witness. Even after he hears the bodies hit the trees, he assumes that they have ridden outward into the valley, rather than straight down as a body would fall. The officer, in the chaos and banality of the war, seems to be more susceptible to the possibility that the world must be ending.

Druse's father riding through the sky further conjures biblical images of the horsemen of the apocalypse, harbingers of doom that would bring destruction and the end of all things. Bierce's apocalyptic motif specifically draws on biblical scenes of judgment in which God is unleashing a hellish retribution upon mankind for their destruction and consumption of each other, for placing no value on fellow human life. Bierce may have felt that the existential horror of the Civil War was a similar retribution unleashed against America for its consumption and abuse of human beings through the systems of slavery. Just as in the biblical judgments, purification of evil could only come through spilling an unimaginable amount of blood.

Bierce contradicts the tradition of the American war story both narratively and symbolically. His narrative arc and use of apocalyptic symbols communicate that entropy, not valor, is the substance of war. Even when a cause is righteous and the actors involved are noble, its experience is nothing but visceral and existential horror. But like the biblical judgments, the horror is sometimes necessary for human progress.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE HORSEMAN

The horseman, though he exists as a threat to the safety of Carter Druse's fellow soldiers, is used in the story as an existential target to represent the moral cost of doing one's duty. The horseman, revealed in the last moment to be Druse's father, never acts aside from a small turn of the head. Even so, he causes Druse great moral anguish and consternation. The decision of whether or not to kill the horseman is ultimately the decision between doing one's duty to a cause versus the moral imperative to protect one's family. When Druse makes his decision, he notably shoots the horse rather than the rider. The horseman is removed from his view and dies from the fall. In the same way, Druse has allowed his moral obligation to his family to be removed from his vision for the sake of duty.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dover Thrift Editions edition of *Civil War Stories* published in 1994.

Part 1 Quotes

He was asleep at his post of duty. But if detected he would be dead shortly afterward, death being the just and legal penalty of his crime.

Related Characters: Carter Druse

Related Themes:

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

In the opening of the story, Druse is asleep at his post, a crime for which he could be executed. Bierce initially casts Druse as the criminal, only to contradict himself later on as

he paints Druse as a noble and courageous man. For the entire remainder of the story, Druse is praised for his character and depicted as a great benefit to his fellow soldiers, and yet he should have been executed for dozing off.

Bierce uses this in two ways: the first and most obvious is to point to the inherent absurdity of military hierarchy. To execute such a valuable soldier over such a small offense would indeed be a waste.

The other use of this turnabout is to set the audience immediately off-balance. Upon quickly realizing that this "criminal" is both a hero and a righteous soldier, the audience intuits that initial perceptions and descriptions may be inaccurate. This is a deft foreshadowing of the eventual revelation that the horseman, whom the audience holds in mind as an enemy for almost the entire first reading, is in fact Druse's father. In both cases, the truth is not revealed until the end.

> No country is so wild and difficult but men will make it a theatre of war; concealed in the forest at the bottom of that military rat-trap, in which half a hundred men in possession of the exits might have starved an army to submission, lay five regiments of Federal infantry ... In case of failure, their position would be perilous in the extreme; and fail they surely would should accident or vigilance apprise the enemy of the movement.

Related Characters: Carter Druse

Related Themes:

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

In the first few paragraphs of the story, Bierce establishes the circumstances and stakes of the conflict soon to arise. Bierce specifically uses the topography of the scene to create an encounter between Carter Druse and the horseman, his father, with only two possible outcomes: either Druse will do his duty and kill his father to protect his fellow soldiers and advance his cause in the war, or he will allow him to escape, spelling certain doom for his comrades and handing a major victory to the enemy.

Bierce effectively creates a moral problem in the mind of the audience that cannot be sidestepped or worked around. Knowing the lay of the land, the audience is soon forced into the moral dilemma along with Druse. When all information is revealed, the reader feels the same existential horror of choosing between the life of one's father and the hundreds of lives of one's fellow soldiers and the future they are fighting for.

Part 2 Quotes

> The sleeping sentinel in the clump of laurel was a young Virginian named Carter Druse. He was the son of wealthy parents, an only child, and had known such ease and cultivation and high living as wealth and taste were able to command in the mountain country of western Virginia. His home was but a few miles from where he now lay.

Related Characters: Carter Druse

Related Themes:

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Bierce cuts away from the scene upon the cliff to identify the sleeping soldier as Carter Druse. The significance of Druse being the son of wealthy Virginians is twofold. As a Virginian, Druse should have fought in the Confederate forces, had he chosen to align with his homeland. Had he done so, with parents such as his (readers later learn that his father is a Confederate officer) it is doubtful that he would have been enlisted as a private. By joining the Union for the sake of his principles, Druse not only betrayed his childhood home, but also humbled himself and gave up the rank and power that his family's wealth and nepotism would have offered. Furthermore, the fact that Druse is now engaging in combat operations, as an invading soldier, within a few miles of where he grew up, means that he would have been likely to be shooting at people he had known all of his life, even friends and family.

> "Well, go, sir, and whatever may occur do what you conceive to be your duty."

Related Characters: Druse's Father (speaker), Carter Druse

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

Druse's father gave this admonition on the morning that Druse left to join the Union army. This statement not only conveys Druse's father's concept of duty, which he has instilled in his son, it also becomes the refrain that ultimately helps Druse to decide he must kill his father. Before he pulls the trigger, his father's words echo in his memory like a "divine mandate" and give him the assurance that although what he is doing is horrific, it must be done. By killing his father, Druse also obeyed his last and final command to him. Though ending his life, Druse is also obeying his father's wishes and honoring the values that he instilled in him.

By the nature of the Civil War, Druse's father would have known that it was possible that they would be forced fight each other. The statement can be seen as way to release Carter Druse from the moral responsibility of patricide, should it come to that.

❝ The duty of the soldier was plain: the man must be shot dead from ambush—without warning, without a moment's spiritual preparation, with never so much as an unspoken prayer, he must be sent to his account.

Related Characters: Druse's Father, Carter Druse

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

Although the first-time reader of the story does not yet know that the horseman is Druse's father, Druse himself does. Moments before Druse takes his shot, he reflects on the penultimate tragedy of the situation. When he left his father in Virginia to go soldiering with the opposing army, he must have known that it was possible he and his father might someday fight. This was a painful reality, but a necessary one for Druse to accept. However, to shoot his father in ambush is another matter. Druse mourns the suddenness of it all; his father will have no warning in death, no chance to prepare himself, no moment to utter a final prayer or reflect on the course of his life. His father is not allowed the honor of dying in open combat, but is caught unaware, with no chance or opportunity to survive. Though the story does not make it clear one way or the other, it is possible that in Druse's decision to shoot the horse and let his father fall to his death, Druse also allowed his father a few extra precious moments to collect himself and spiritually prepare.

❝ Druse withdrew his eyes from the valley and fixed them again upon the group of man and horse in the sky, and again it was through the sights of his rifle. But this time his aim was at the horse … Duty had conquered; the spirit said to the body: "Peace, be still." He fired.

Related Characters: Druse's Father, Carter Druse

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

Carter Druse, upon learning that the horseman is his own father, falters for only a moment. Remembering the admonition of his father to do his duty above all else and at any cost, he resolves to shoot him down. Even with this decision, however, Druse shifts the aim of his rifle from the horseman to the horse, who is standing on the cliff's edge. Rather than kill his father by his own bullet, he elects to let the fall kill him instead.

In this manner, Druse removes himself, by a small degree, from the killing. By letting gravity and fate be the forces that technically end his father's life, he acknowledges that the whole situation is out of his control. This reflects the broader, horrific nature of war, which the story reveals to have rendered the nation and families within it apart. Moreover, it shows that Druse was not driven by any hidden malice towards his father. There was no catharsis or vindictive sense of retribution in the killing; he participated in it as little as possible.

Part 3 Quotes

❝ Filled with amazement and terror by this apparition of a horseman in the sky—half believing himself the chosen scribe of some new Apocalypse, the officer was overcome by the intensity of emotions; his legs failed him and he fell.

Related Characters: The Wandering Officer

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

After Druse has shot the horseman—revealed later to have been his own father—a Union officer below sees the man and his horse falling through the air. Bierce here uses his strongest supernatural imagery and directly links it to biblical images by describing it as "apocalyptic." The use of a scribe of the apocalypse is a direct parallel to the book of Revelation in the Bible, in which John the prophet (or scribe) witnesses the end of the world, the judgment of sins, and the birth of a new world.

That the wandering officer's mind is so immediately open to the possibility that he is witnessing an apocalyptic event is a strong indicator of his prior mental state. The Civil War, with its incredible death toll and horrific manner of setting, friends, family, and neighbors against each other, may well have felt like the world was ending or at least coming apart. And in a way, it was. An American era of success built on slavery was indeed coming to its bloody end. The old world and old ways that many Americans knew were dying. America was paying with blood for its sins of division and centuries of slavery. As in Revelation, the carnage of the Civil War also paved the way for a new, emancipated nation to be born.

Part 4 Quotes

"Did you fire?" the sergeant whispered.
"Yes."
"At what?"
"A horse. It was standing on yonder rock—pretty far out. You see it is no longer there. It went over the cliff."
The man's face was white, but he showed no other sign of emotion. Having answered, he turned his eyes away and said no more. The sergeant did not understand.
"See here, Druse," he said after a moment's silence, it's no use making a mystery. I order you to report. Was there anybody on the horse?"
"Yes."
"Well?"
"My father."
The sergeant rose to his feet and walked away. "Good God!" he said.

Related Characters: Carter Druse , The Sergeant (speaker), Druse's Father

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

This is the final moment of the final scene of the story. Bierce has concealed the fact that the horseman is Druse's father until the last possible moment, although Druse himself knew. With the realization that Druse's crisis of duty and morality has also been the pain of killing his only surviving family member, the entire story takes on a far darker and more cynical tone and straddles the territory of American Gothic, which Bierce was fond of exploring.

Druse's behavior in the aftermath is also interesting; his white face implies that he is internally torn, but he is also emotionless, and neither offers information nor denies it. Druse has both championed duty over all else and retreated into it. He is no longer the son of his father, the child of a privileged upbringing, but a dutiful soldier.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PART 1

On an autumn afternoon in 1861, next to a small road in western Virginia, a young soldier is asleep in a bush. He is lying flat on his stomach, stretched out, with a rifle loosely grasped in his right hand. Had "the criminal" been discovered asleep at his post, his punishment would have been death.

The soldier is referred to as "the criminal" by the author, but only in this instance.He is later praised as a "courageous gentleman" and described as the paragon of virtue. Bierce highlights the absurdity of military hierarchy by noting that such an excellent soldier could be wasted for the mere crime of succumbing to exhaustion.

The bush that the soldier is concealed in sits next to a road that leads downward into a forested valley. Near the point where the road descends into the valley is a large flat rock, the edge of a cliff, that juts into the air. From the cliff's edge to the trees below is a thousand-foot drop. The valley and surrounding cliffs create a natural bowl with a meadow at its base. It is well-protected and concealed, but there seems to be only one narrow passage into it. From the sleeping soldier's position, he has a vantage of both the road and the entire valley.

Bierce's experience as a topographical engineer is on display here. Where most writers might note that there is a cliff and a valley or describe the trees, Bierce explains how the ridges intersect, at what angles, and features the topography as a device of the story with uncommon precision.

Five Union army regiments have taken shelter in the valley. They are concealed and planning to launch a surprise attack against a nearby enemy encampment the following night. The valley is a risky position to be in—it allows for a surprise attack, but should they be discovered there is no way of escaping up such a narrow road and they would be easily conquered.

As a sentry, the soldier is in a critical position. The very survival of the Union regiments relies on preventing their discovery by the enemy. Noble as he is, the soldier's crime of falling asleep could have cost the lives of hundreds of men.

PART 2

The sleeping soldier is revealed to be Carter Druse. Druse is the only son of wealthy Virginians whose childhood was the definition of privilege and comfort. His childhood home was not far from where he now lay.

Druse is a cultured, well-educated young man. However, as is often the plight of the privileged, he has also led a very sheltered life and has not had the opportunity to stand on his own two feet.

The narrator recalls the moment in which Druse announced that he would be fighting for the Union: he stood from breakfast table and announced that a Union regiment was passing through the area and he would be joining it, rather than fighting for the Confederacy and his Virginia homeland.

That Druse could so feasibly fight for the army that would be opposing his homeland highlights the uniquely moral conflict of the Civil War. While slavery is never explicitly named in the story, it forms the moral undercurrent of the story. Bierce himself was an abolitionist, and he seems to write this into context of Druse.

Druse's father solemnly replied, "Well, go, sir, and whatever may occur do what you conceive to be your duty. Virginia, to which you are a traitor, must get on without you." He also relays that Druse's mother is dying, but if both father and son should survive, they will speak again after the war has ended. Druse and his father part ways, showing each other reverence and courtesy. Druse's father is secretly heartbroken.

Druse and his father represent two opposing visions for America, the old and the new. His father was raised in the old ways and fights for them, including the institution of slavery. Druse fights for an emancipated America, a progressive vision of the future. Although Druse and his father have not yet shed blood over their ideological conflict, it forces them to take up opposing roles.

Druse leaves his parents' home to become a soldier. By his bravery and strength of character he earns the high regard of his comrades and his officers, and for these qualities and his familiarity with the western Virginian territory he is posted as the sentry at the edge of the valley.

When Druse steps out on his own, he takes his first steps of self-discovery. Both literally and ideologically, he is making his own way. He no longer can rest on the reputation of his wealthy father, but earns his own reputation through virtue, courage, and tenacity.

Even so, exhaustion overcame willpower and Druse fell asleep. Now, though neither sound nor touch has disturbed him, Druse awakes and takes hold of his rifle. He instantly knows that something is amiss, as if something supernatural had whispered to him and roused him from sleep.

Heroic as Druse may be, he is also human. In this case, his humanity will cost him dearly.This is also the first mention of the supernatural in the story, a device that Bierce will use several times again to frame the events in an apocalyptic tone.

Druse spies a figure standing against the cliff's edge, a horse and rider. The rider's face is turned away from him, looking downward into the valley. Druse's first reaction is admiration for the great aesthetic quality of it all. **The horseman** is framed against the open sky, making him appear massive in size. The afternoon sun and the colors of the uniform remind Druse of a Greek statue of a god, and for a moment Druse feels as if the war has ended in his sleep and he is looking upon a carved monument.

Despite Druse's rejection of ideology of his childhood, his aesthetic admiration of the horseman belies a cultured mind that could only be produced by wealth and comfort. His childhood and the upbringing that his parents gave him have left lifelong marks, from his aesthetic acuity to his sense of duty.

The horse moves very slightly and brings Druse back to the reality of the situation. Druse knows that he must kill **the horseman** to keep the regiments hidden from their enemies. He readies his rifle, still lying hidden in the bush, and takes aim at the horseman's breast.

Before he learns the horseman's identity, Druse is compelled by his sense of duty and does not hesitate. He aims for the man's chest, a sure shot. He is willing to bear the weight of ending the horseman's life by his own bullet.

The horseman turns his head so that Druse can see his face, though the horseman cannot see Druse. Though Druse knows he is still hidden, he feels as if the horseman looked straight into his eyes and into his heart. Druse becomes suddenly anguished by the thought of killing the man, though he knows that it would be done to protect his comrades. He briefly hallucinates that the horse and rider are a great black figure set against a fiery sky. He becomes pale and nearly faints for a moment.

Druse feels that he has been seen through by the horseman, even if the horseman is yet unaware of him. His sense of duty to the cause above all else has laid bare his values and priorities. The horseman as a symbol and as a character, is putting Druse's resolve to the test, a crucible of sorts. After the later reveal that the horseman is Druse's father, this scene takes on new resonance; it raises not just the moral question of killing a man, but also the question of duty to a noble cause versus to one's family. Bierce again conjures visions of biblical judgment, which were inflicted not only for punishment but to cleanse impurity and evil.

Druse regains his composure, sure that he must kill **the horseman**. He knows that he cannot possibly capture the scout, and though he briefly entertains the notion that perhaps the horseman has not discovered the regiments and may go free unharmed, a quick glance into the valley shows him that the Union soldiers are revealed. The man must be shot down from his hidden position with no warning. Druse takes aim again, but this time aims at the horse rather than the rider. Druse's father's admonition, "Whatever may occur do what you conceive to be your duty," echoes in his memory. Druse steadies himself and fires the shot.

Although Druse has steeled himself and regained his resolve, he does not take aim at the rider (whom, unknown to the reader as of yet, he has now identified as his father). Rather, aims for the horse, knowing that the shot will send both horse and rider over the cliff and to their deaths. Seeing no alternative to ending the horseman's life, Druse either cannot or will not bear the weight of direct responsibility for the man's life. Rather than his own bullet, he lets the fall from the cliff (and thus, fate) land the killing blow.

PART 3

A wandering officer walks away from the regiment up to the foot of a cliff and into a small cave-like opening. The officer looks up, admiring the height of the trees and the cliff, and sees the horse and rider falling from the cliff. **The horseman** is still astride his mount, sitting upright, and the horse's legs are flailing in such a way as to give the appearance that it is actually galloping and leaping through the air.

The horseman is still alive and falling to his death, astride his dead steed. It is interesting that in the entire course of events, neither Druse nor the horseman ever move. Druse's struggle is completely internalized, and even the horseman's final act as a symbol happens passively in the moments before he dies. The strange image of the horseman flying through the sky, meanwhile, reflects Bierce's use of supernatural and apocalyptic imagery throughout the story to underscore the horror of the Civil War.

The wandering officer is both amazed and terrified. He firmly believes that it is a flying **horseman** and does not realize it is an enemy soldier falling to his death. In his amazement, he briefly entertains the idea that he is witnessing some sort of apocalypse. He is so shocked that he falls down, and as he does he hears the crash of the horse and rider's bodies hitting the treetops.

Here, Bierce uses his strongest and most specific apocalyptic imagery to reflect the horrors of war. In a reference to the four horsemen of the apocalypse from the biblical Revelations, Bierce reflects how, at the time, it may well have felt like the world was nearing its end. As families were divided or set to kill each other, many may have thought that the world they had known, with its structure and order, were coming apart.

The wandering officer is so convinced that it was truly a flying **horseman** that he sets off in search of the man as if he had glided diagonally down into the valley, rather than realizing that the horseman has fallen straight downward. He searches for the bodies for half an hour and then gives up. When he returns to camp, the commander asks what he has seen. The officer thinks better of saying what he truly saw, but concludes that there must be no road leading into the valley from that direction.

Even after deciding that he is not in fact witnessing the apocalypse, the officer is still in such a suggestive state that he believes that it still must have been a flying horseman. The stress of war and the existential horror seem to have crippled his rational faculties. A fantasy seemed just as plausible as reality and he truly believed they were being set upon by airborne cavalry.

PART 4

Carter Druse, having taken his shot, reloads and carries on his sentry duty, never having gotten up from his position. After ten minutes pass, the sergeant crawls up next to Druse and presses him for information. Druse tells him that he shot a horse off of the cliff and when it died it went over the edge. Druse's face is white, but shows no emotion. When the sergeant inquires who was on the horse, he reveals that it was Druse's father.

With the revelation that the horseman whom Druse was deliberating on killing was his own father, the entire story changes. Bierce forces the reader, who has already taken one journey of moral deliberation, reconsider all that they have just read in the light of this tragic, even horrific, new circumstance.

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